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The socialite named Allegra who became Boris Johnson's first wife

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They appeared to be the golden couple of Oxford University.

Boris Johnson was the brains who, as the eccentric president of the prestigious Oxford Union, was already earmarked as a future political leader, while **Allegra Mostyn-Owen** was the ethereal beauty who had been a Tatler cover girl.

Their romance blossomed amid the city's dreaming spires, and they tied the knot in a grand wedding soon after leaving university. But the fairy tale was not to last long – and today their lives are worlds apart.

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Allegra Mostyn-Owen with Boris Johnson at Oxford in 1987, celebrating the end of his final Classics exams

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As Boris began his term as Mayor of London last week, his former wife went to work at an East London mosque where she teaches art to young Muslims.

This was not the life Allegra seemed destined for. As the only daughter of acclaimed Italian writer Gaia Servadio and multimillionaire landowner and art historian William Mostyn-Owen, a privileged existence amid the upper echelons of society seemed assured.

But Allegra, now 43, is said to have been so deeply affected by the collapse of her marriage that she left all that behind to channel her passions into good causes.

She now lives in a modest home in West Kensington, has never remarried and has no children.

"When she was younger, people would say that with her beauty and wealth, she would have the world at her feet," said Gaia. "And after she married Boris it seemed that they would, indeed, have it all.

"They were a striking couple and so much in love. But they were not compatible. Boris is a man who needed someone very obedient and silent, who would be willing to stay in the background and create a soothing home life, while giving him space to build a glittering career. My daughter wasn't that kind of person.

"She has not always been the most self-confident person, but she's very strong-minded. Boris was very ambitious and Allegra is very sensitive.

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"In the end she did not like the competitive world he so enjoyed. The divorce was very painful and Allegra suffered greatly. It took her a long time to regain her confidence, but she has since found happiness in her work as a ceramist and painter.

"She is independently well off, thanks to her father's money, and is very much her own woman. Although I would have loved to have seen her remarry and start a family, she always insists that her life has been rich and rewarding. Allegra has a mission to try to create a better world through teaching. I'm proud of that."

Boris and Allegra met in 1984, in their first term at Oxford, because of typical Boris bungling. He arrived at her room at Trinity College on the wrong night for a party.

"I was reading this textbook," said Allegra. "And suddenly, there's this stranger at the door, who goes, 'Oh, oh, oh, oh.' We drank a bottle of wine and talked. He made me laugh. There were lots of good jokes, and lots of bad ones."

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On their wedding day in 1987

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Not only was Boris, who was reading Classics at Balliol, funny, clever and charming, he appeared non-threatening.

"I didn't really think he was making a play for me, despite the fact there was lots of curry-a-deux at the Kismet Tandoori" said Allegra

"After I did the cover for Tatler, people decided I must be beautiful. I got declarations of love every day. I didn't want anything to do with them. Boris felt like a safe place – but not for very long."

They married on September 5, 1987, when they were both 23. The reception at Woodhouse, Allegra's family home in Shropshire, featured an opera singer and a string quartet and was described as "like La Dolce Vita and Brideshead rolled into one."

But Boris turned up with the wrong clothes and had to walk down the aisle in trousers and cufflinks borrowed from Tory MP John Biffen.

Lady Biffen said: "The only reason he didn't get married in my husband's shoes is that his feet were larger. Limping to the altar would have been worse than the holes in his own shoes."

Cover Girl: Allegra's shoot for the July/August 1984 edition of Tatler

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And within an hour, Boris had managed to lose his wedding ring.

After a honeymoon in Egypt, the newlyweds bought a flat in West London and Boris started work as a management consultant – but left after just a week.

Allegra was working on the London Evening Standard and Boris decided that he, too, would be a journalist, and joined The Times.

Allegra has said: "When we got married, that was the end of the relationship, instead of the beginning."

At the time, she needed support as her parents were separating after 28 years, but Boris was busy building his own career. In 1989, he became Brussels correspondent for The Daily Telegraph. Allegra joined him there but felt alienated in the city.

Allegra said. "My family was disintegrating, and I was cut off in Brussels. I must have been vulnerable."

In February 1990, Allegra fled back to London. One friend said: "Boris was distraught. He

was very, very unhappy."

The couple did reconcile briefly, but to no avail. Boris began to pursue Marina, the daughter of distinguished BBC correspondent Sir Charles Wheeler. She was heavily pregnant by the time Boris's divorce was finalised in March 1993, and they married 12 days later.

Allegra, deeply wounded by the break-up, withdrew from society circles and took up art. For the past six years she has been running workshops for five to 14-year-olds at the Minhaj-Ul-Quran Mosque in Forest Gate. Mosque president Istiyaq Ahmed described her as an "excellent and hard-working" teacher.

He said: "She is not a Muslim, but has been an important part of our attempts to deradicalise our young people. Allegra provides a positive message that something is being done for our community." It is rewarding work – if far from the life she expected. Friends say she and Boris "get on fine" on the rare times they meet, but add that she has never forgotten how their break-up turned her life upside-down.